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Lands That Were Golden

I. New York and the Hinterland

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IN THE loud nineteen-twenties, when a Younger Generation could still hope to save the nation by disillusioning it, hardly anything American seemed destined to escape the scorn of the debunkers. A backward look, however, reveals a principle of selection that in former days was less apparent. Upon the Eastern metropolitan regions to which the Young Intellectuals were fleeing, the blows fell lightly and good-humouredly when they fell at all; this region, with Europe beyond, was their refuge. Regions of the South Atlantic coast, though in the past they had greatly offended, were treated with some indulgence. Cities like Baltimore and Charleston, even parts of Virginia and North Carolina, were spared rough treatment; they were conceded a lingering modicum of civilization. But upon a region that came to be known as the hinterland, lying vaguely somewhere to the west and south, the blows fell ceaselessly, without quarter to persons, institutions, or localities.

Innocent of history as they were, the young scorn-

ers — many of whom were actually on the ragged edge of middle age — could hardly have been expected to know that their lament was so familiar in American annals as to be antique. The hinterland about which they complained was the Old West that long before this had annoyed the dynasties of Virginia and Massachusetts: it began then, as in the nineteen-twenties, with Kentucky and Tennessee, and extended through the enormous regions south and west to Texas and the Great Plains; and it covered the country north of the Ohio River and westward, athwart the upper reaches of the Mississippi Valley. The complaint of the nineteen-twenties was almost identical, in some respects, with that of an earlier day: the Eastern metropolitans were distressed by the uncouth manners of the Western folk — in this case, their impudent disrespect for the patterns of modernity that many of the critics were just in the act of putting on for the first time.

The legend, thus renewed under peculiar circumstances, of the barbarism of the South, especially in its southwestern parts, and of the vulgarity and dullness of the Middle West, for a good many years has governed the approach of the metropolitan East to the phenomena of life in the so-called hinterland. Whether the approach be literary, or sociological, or merely journalistic, the assumptions have been always the same, and the ensuing generalizations have been uniformly tagged with shocked protest and pious exhortation. The South — so the tale runs — is a region full of little else but lynchings, shootings, chain gangs, poor whites, Ku Kluxers, hookworm, pellagra, and a few decayed patricians whose chief intent is to de-

prive the uncontaminated, spiritual-singing Negro of his life and liberty. But what is more shocking, it is inhabited by believers in God, who pass anti-evolution laws; and more shocking still, it is in thought and deed studiously backward and anti-progressive. The Middle West — the tale says — is a land of morons, boobs, and shoulder-smacking Babbitts, in which, despite a plethora of schools and modern conveniences, an artist soul feels cramped and misunderstood; or a land of lonely farms where men and women drudge away their sterile lives; or of repressions and shams, where tender little Clyde Griffiths's who start out as bell-boys must perforce end up as murderers. Over such pictures the East stormed, or shed crocodile tears, in the clever nineteen-twenties.

The familiar condescension of the East for the West, of course, may be viewed in part as the condescension of the capital toward the provinces, or of the home country toward the colonial dependencies. The American of the Atlantic coast has been prone to cherish precisely the attitude of superiority toward the outlying regions that the Englishman has assumed toward the United States. The old New Yorker or New Englander, when not suppressing his real sentiments in order to achieve a commercial or political bargain, has often spoken of the manners of Westerners in the language of Mrs. Trollope. But in the nineteen-twenties this condescension became for the first time the source of an aesthetic theory which professed to explain the sterility of American art, and of a literary fashion which produced a stream of "realistic" novels that repeated over and over Mr. Van Wyck Brooks's strictures on Puritanism and its fatal exten-

sion on the American continent, or Mr. Mencken's volatile dissatisfaction with most things indigenously American.

Although the aesthetic theory has lingered on rather persistently, now and then fitfully reappearing in books like Ludwig Lewisohn's *Expression in America* (recently criticized in these pages by Dorothea Brande), the literary fashion now seems to be falling on evil days. That the vitality has gone out of it may be safely hazarded from the fact that the Pulitzer judges, who are generally careful to stay at least five or six years behind the times, have recently given an award to Mr. T. S. Stribling's *The Store*, as the novel of the year that best depicts American life. Since Mr. Stribling's theme is the old theme of the backwardness of his native Southern region, we are fairly well justified, under the circumstances, in labelling that theme as dead. Furthermore, Mr. Mencken has left *The American Mercury*. Mr. Bernard De Voto has demolished Mr. Brooks's theory of Puritanism in frontier life. And Mr. Malcolm Cowley has sung a requiem over the home-coming remains of the Little Magazines and the expatriates of yesterday. Now only a Pulitzer award for Mr. Erskine Caldwell is needed to fill up the charnel house with bones of the long since dead, and to close one of the strangest, but one of the most ominous, chapters in American literary history.

II

If there had not been a renaissance among historians, which quietly began at almost the same time as the famous literary renaissance, but produced its

effects later, the literary fashion would doubtless have lasted longer and begotten more monstrous creations. It is strange — or perhaps it is not strange at all — that the historical movement has received little attention in comparison with the literary movement which it paralleled. The circumstances of its origin have not been recorded; its course has nowhere been charted. The genuine history of American life so quickly succeeded the debunking efforts of the rebel aesthetes that it must have been under way, as spade-work and exploration, for a long time. Perhaps the rousing argument over American culture helped to give occasion for its appearance in a definitive and apprehensible form.

Now, at any rate, we can see that the years when Mr. Mencken and Mr. Lewis were blasting the hinterland with their negative excoriations were years of studied accumulation, in the hinterland itself, of the particular items of an American culture, or cultures, that the critics argued did not exist. Doubtless it was the slow drive of the historical movement that at last, somewhat to the surprise of Eastern publishers, swung popular taste away from realistic fiction to biography and history and ultimately forced even the intellectuals to reconsider the historical and cultural data which they had too blithely dismissed. In these years Claude Bowers's political studies of Jefferson and Hamilton or of the Reconstruction period swept the country; and a little later came James Truslow Adams with *The Epic of America* and *The Adams Family*. Although some of these books and others like them were in a popular or semi-popular vein, they could not be passed by as insignificant, for they rested upon

the solid foundation that the professional historians, unknown to the general public, had long been busy in erecting. From the semi-popular books it was an easy step to the works of professional historians that were slowly but surely tipping the balance of American consideration. Of these works, many of which were of revolutionary importance, I shall name but two examples, for the general principles that they supply: the works of Frederick J. Turner, beginning with his study of the frontier and ending with his *Significance of the Sections in United States History*; and on the literary side, Vernon Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought*.

A great many of the more notable histories were written by Southerners and Westerners — men from the regions that had been most severely attacked. Parrington was a man of the Far Northwest; Turner came from the Middle West; Ulrich B. Phillips, author of *Life and Labor in the Old South*, was a native of Georgia who taught history at the University of Chicago; Beveridge and Bowers were Middle Westerners. Their account of the American past, and, by implication, their interpretation of the present, stood out in bold contradiction to *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* or *The Education of Henry Adams*, which had worked like a sweet poison in the veins of Eastern aesthetes. The new historical movement to a large extent denied the facts upon which the earlier critical statement had been based. But what was more important, the historians found the life of the hinterland rich, abundant, diverse, where the critics reported only barrenness. That it had serious blemishes, all admitted. But the Eastern explanations were not al-

ways the right explanations, and defects were not to be removed by the short-cuts that were being prescribed. Eastern criticism implied that there was a sovereign national culture, still originating in the East and destined to rule the hinterland as its subject territory. But in the works of Turner and Parrington, the fundamental thesis read otherwise. The lands that were golden and had caught the westward spill of an Eastern population were no longer tributary. Now they were divided into the self-conscious and mature sections or regions into which the tendencies of their past and their physiographic environment had shaped them. There was no sovereign national culture for them to bow to, or none, at least, that was the private function of a region all too recognizable as an Eastern region.

In the historical movement, therefore, were not only the facts for a rebuttal of metropolitan criticism, but the foundations of a self-assertive counter-attack. The new regional movement at once built upon those foundations, adding to the work of the historians the researches of folklorists who were probing into the songs, legends, and crafts that constituted the living and growing substratum of a native American culture.

The upshot was a counter-stroke of a kind new in American history. The contention between East and West was not new. But the old quarrels had dealt with matters economic and political. In matters cultural the hinterland had in general previously aspired to possess the terms of civilization approved in the East from which it had lately come. Now the old economic and political feud was to reach into a new

field. There was to be a battle of cultures as well. The quarrel was as to how people ought to live.

III

It is neither possible nor sensible to wave aside the metropolitan attack as completely futile or completely mistaken. It was often brilliant and sometimes pointed. But when one begins to ask what way of life the critics wanted the hinterland to adopt, one must pass by whatever undeniable merit the criticism may have had for its no less undeniable, and now startling, weaknesses. The works of the critics were anathemas, not credos. It is not easy to disentangle from their utterances any positive scheme to which they would give allegiance. Occasionally Mr. Mencken talked about "decency" or "intelligence". The advocates of "creative criticism" wanted personal taste to overrule aesthetic or historical standards. Mr. Van Wyck Brooks and others were anti-Puritan; but many of this school were so ill-informed historically that they thought Puritanism and Methodism the same thing. Nearly all the critics were anti-religious; nearly all preferred an aesthetic judgement to a moral one. All were anti-Victorian, and talked a lot about Freud and sex. If they had any strong positive belief, it was in the power of science to determine the conditions of human life, and in the power of art to soothe and make genteel. Politics, economics, world affairs were at the moment beneath their notice. They did not believe very firmly in anything; but they disbelieved stoutly in a very great deal. They were sceptics, or cynics. They had cast off loyalties to place or kin, or they had had none to begin with. Though their ranks

numbered a few men of native Eastern stock, the greater number were of two sorts: migrants to New York from some region of the hinterland, from which they had escaped in search of a career; or scions of the newer immigrant stock — the expatriated nationals from a medley of European countries — who had no intimate share in the historic experience of any American place. Their temper was cosmopolitan in a way; but the intensity of their dissociation gives point to Chesterton's remark that New York, though a cosmopolitan city, is not a city of cosmopolitans. The essence of the doctrine that they sought to convey to outlying America may be stated in one word: Decadence.

But at the moment when the Younger Generation were making a choice for Decadence, the great regions of the South and West had put their stormy youth behind them and were ready for the counsels of vigorous maturity. In contrast with the states of the Northeast and the Middle Atlantic, in which the old American stock had become a minority, the population of the South was almost wholly native, and, if the Negroes are excepted, it was still basically of the old colonial breed. In the Middle West the same stock was still a dominant majority, which was far more successful than the East had been in attracting and assimilating its later immigrants — largely Scandinavians and Germans who were racially akin to the older stock. These regions — physiographically linked as one by conditions of life in the Mississippi Valley, but sectionally split into a north and south by deep historic causes — were the Old West of American story, the seat, for more than a hundred years, of the

"selfconscious American democracy" of Turner's phrase. There were many reasons why the regions should examine their life in order to understand its strength or correct its abuses. But within themselves there was no reason whatever for turning to Decadence.

It is one of the tragedies of American history that the intellectual leadership of the United States at this time should have been even temporarily in the hands of a group of artists and thinkers who were more impressed by the economic and artistic defeatism of post-War Europe than by the living and diverse traditions of their native America. But there they were, in New York. From old habit the regions looked naturally to the East, as one source from which to derive cultural guides and examples. Besides, New York had accumulated not only the prestige but all the material appointments of an intellectual capital. New York had a vigorous press, able critical journals, thriving publishing houses. It had wealth and power with which to influence or control opinion so far as opinion could be reached through urban agencies.

What the regions of the hinterland did not see at the time was that New York was beginning a spiritual secession from the America of which it had been an organic part. In its population it was already a foreign city, with an amazing preponderance of heterogeneous new racial stocks. Yet the mixed population mattered far less than the ideas which its peculiar sensitivity to the European post-War situation predisposed its intellectual leaders to transmit. For one reason or another these ideas had little to do with the fundamental European tradition which in times past had been

valuable to American thought. What came across the Atlantic in the nineteen-twenties was the rationalized despair of European groups that felt vitality and power slipping from them or the rationalized aspiration of other groups, some of which were not essentially European at all, that were clutching after power. They were ideas born of political and economic situations that did not apply in the United States.

Thus it happened that New York transmitted, to the one people on earth who were freest of class-consciousness, the Marxian theory of the war of the classes. To the least neurotic and most energetic of races it offered the Freudian doctrine of repressions and complexes. To a people the greater part of whom were schooled in Protestant religion and morality New York presented, with a knowing leer, under the guise of literary classics, the works of voluptuaries and perverts, the teeming pages of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, and all the choicest remains of the literary bordellos of the ancient and modern world. German Expressionism, French Dadaism, the erotic primitivism of D. H. Lawrence, the gigantic *fin de siècle* pedantries and experimentalisms of James Joyce, the infantilism of Gertrude Stein and various Parisian coteries — these furnished most of the catchwords for all the clever people.

While all this was happening, the New Poetry movement was captured by Amy Lowell and the émigrés and given so thoroughly cosmopolitan a turn that it lost all root in America. Its aesthetics, always a little cloudy, became so tenuous that the reaction, when it set in, leaned over backward in excessive zeal for the scholarly, the learned, the exact. Poets like

Frost, Robinson, or Lindsay, who wrote out of a frankly American experience, had to be looked at through a thick haze of French symbolist verse. Their traditionalism was as little understood as the more self-conscious and entirely different traditionalism of T. S. Eliot, which came a little later. Prohibition was iniquitous; the Versailles Treaty was iniquitous; politics, God, the Ohio Gang, the Old South, the New Middle West — all were iniquitous somehow or other, and were denounced in the tipsy medley that went on and on. It was the fashion, in fact, to be very pessimistic and a little drunk most of the time. While New York read *The Decline of the West*, Joseph Wood Krutch defined the modern temper as an artistic acceptance of coming doom, and quoted the "Hail, horrors!" speech of Milton's Rebel Angel in the accents of a toper who begins to recall snatches of poetry at 2 A. M.

To offer this farrago to the hinterland of America as representing what was worth thinking about in all fields of thought and worth using as the *exempla* of the good life, was like giving to a man in ordinary health the perfected hypodermic needle with which the complaisant quack furnishes the drug addict. To the sections rebuked as lacking in civilization the critics recommended, it would seem, the diseases of civilization rather than the true urbanity and high thinking that would be expected to emanate from a civilized metropolis. To the most powerful nation on the globe, unravaged by war and anything but disheartened by circumstance, the spokesmen of New York found nothing better to offer than a gospel of impotence and defeat.

IV

Out of the various results of this process, three stand out as important. First, the life of the outlying regions and the art which they were now ready to produce — for the first time abundantly, and consistently with their own traditions — were judged in New York in the light of the weak cosmopolitanism or decayed Europeanism in which the critical spokesmen were interested. This judgement, once made and reported, was disseminated in two directions. Since New York is the main channel of communication between America and Europe, it was the New York account of the estate of the hinterland that went abroad. And in telling foreign capitals what New York thought of the hinterland, New York gave it the meaning that Europe was only too eager to accept as correct. The black reputation of America in Europe, though brought about in part by political and economic causes, has clearly been motivated and sustained by damaging evidence furnished from New York. It was a strange disproportion that allowed a single city, in a far eastern corner of America, a practical monopoly in reporting the life of a continental area that it did not pretend to understand. It is painful to recall how often that report has been partial, how rarely it has been catholic. From one point of view, such reporting looks almost like a betrayal of the country from which New York draws its wealth, its power, its life. But more likely it is only a blind presumption, which a dweller in the hinterland can observe with incredulity and growing irritation.

But New York views, New York standards, New

York criticism of the nineteen-twenties also passed readily by domestic channels into the hinterland itself. Far from being illiterate, as the critics were charging, the regions of the hinterland now seem to have been almost too literate for their own good. As New York never failed to read British criticisms of America, so the hinterland did not fail to read the books of its Eastern castigators, and often made them best-sellers in the regions most fiercely castigated. The younger generation of the hinterland, pouring from the crowded high schools and colleges, almost pathetically eager to keep up with the swift pace of the times, were often enough persuaded to hail the literature of disillusionment as the flag of their emancipation. In part, we cannot doubt that the metropolitan onslaught made decided progress within the hinterland; it captured, it perverted, it inspired or deflated. But in part it also angered. As the historical movement gathered force, and as old political and economic issues again came to the front, regional anger was gradually fortified by deliberate cultural resistance of a kind less easily routed than Fundamentalism or Ku Kluxism. A still younger generation has arisen to succeed the younger generation that was half persuaded to deny itself. To this youngest generation Decadence makes little appeal, and the metropolitan promise of New York is sterile. This generation is ready, perhaps, to make the reply which the oldest generation, angered by metropolitan attacks, could frame only in antiquated terms. That reply is regionalism, a doctrine of self-determination which renews, in different terms, the old cleavage between the lands of the East and those of the South and West.

This yielding and this resistance will serve to explain some of the damaging confusions that the student of regionalism will find today in whatever regions he attempts to explore. To the onslaught of dissociated New York and to the mixed reaction of the hinterland are due the contradictory phenomena that flourish side by side. In any given region one is sure to find warring schools of thought, opposing groups of writers, clashing social tendencies. Among the writers there are always regionalists, conscious or unconscious, old or young, who are loyal, and metropolitans who repeat the critical strictures of a decade ago. In Georgia, for example, are John Donald Wade and Erskine Caldwell, and what the one loves the other hates; in Mississippi, Stark Young and William Faulkner; in Tennessee, T. S. Stribling and Allen Tate; in the Middle West, Willa Cather and Theodore Dreiser, Vachel Lindsay and Ben Hecht. The same confusion puts skyscrapers in cities whose chief resource is plenitude of land; Hollywood manners in mountain cabins; French eroticism in Puritan households; the urban wisecrack in the mouths of Sut Lovengood's grandchildren. But deeper than this conflict, which from day to day changes its term, is a constant element: the inertia of the regions, which is also their unselfconscious life, their differentiating vitality. This constant element, which may be veiled but can never be obliterated, is likely to prove the deciding element.

But, lastly, the consequences of the situation are no less important for New York and the East than for the hinterland. If New York is to be an intellectual capital, New York ought to consider realistically

what kind of relation to the hinterland will make its position secure and its function good. Obviously, New York cannot endure the impoverishment within itself which would be the result of too severe a dissociation. But that is exactly the result which its past tendencies have seemed to invite. Habituated to a conception of itself as metropolitan arbiter of taste and ideas, New York has erred in thinking that it can impose as freely as it can judge. America is not, as New York thinks, so nearly uniform, or so closely approaching the metropolitan image as to accept without demur any image proposed from New York. It would be more in point to contemplate the other possibility — that eventually New York might no more be able to determine the life of regions around Chicago, New Orleans, San Francisco than it can now determine Rome or Vienna.

New York has generally refused to contemplate such a possibility. This refusal, when combined with the aesthetic preferences and forms of life that it has been prone to cultivate, threatens to make New York almost as much a centre of repulsion as of attraction, and tends to deprive it of the continual refreshment from provincial sources that a capital might normally expect. Without too great temerity, one might find in this situation a partial explanation of the decay of its critical thought, or of the rapid transformation of many of its periodicals from "national" journals to sectional and propagandistic organs. Through a like consideration one can begin to understand books that are otherwise meaningless: the laboured attempts of Waldo Frank, Granville Hicks, Ludwig Lewisohn, V. F. Calverton to camou-

flage American traditions with their own peculiar obsessions about sex, Zionism, and the down-trodden proletariat. One can also understand why New York journalists and critics so often essay by sheer noise to howl down any dissidence within their own metropolitan neighbourhood, or the more ominous dissidence of Old New England, to which the turn of affairs in the nineteen-twenties was far from pleasing. But none of these attempts, understandable though they may be, will make New York a good capital, for they do not check the process of dissociation that has already set in. It cannot be checked unless New York will recognize that the hinterland of America is no longer New York's hinterland. But it is, as it has always been, the West, or the Southwest, where lands were golden once, and for dwellers there, self-reliant and not without a power of their own, they are golden still.

(To be continued)